Political Research Quarterly

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Does the Messenger Matter?

Candidate-Media Agenda Convergence and Its Effects on Voter Issue Salience

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Though research has shown that candidates and the media can influence the importance voters ascribe to political issues, little work has sought to test the interactive agenda-setting effects of each—in particular, to determine whether the ability of candidates to set the public's agenda depends on the media's willingness to reflect their issue emphases. Using an experiment conducted during the early stages of the 2006 Texas gubernatorial election, the author shows that candidate attempts to influence voter issue salience are most effective when the media focus on the same topics. The findings suggest the value for candidates of enlisting the news media in helping to pass their messages along and serve as a point of departure for more work on the influence of candidate-media agenda convergence.

Keywords: campaigns; elections; agenda setting; news media; issue salience

In a political campaign, little is more fundamental to a candidate's success than controlling the election's issue agenda. Persuading skeptics and mobilizing supporters is key (Shaw 1999a), but those endeavors are, at some level, contingent on a candidate's ability to frame the electoral choice as a decision on the issues on which he or she has an advantage. Setting the terms by which citizens make their choices is an essential part of a winning strategy (Carsey 2000; Iyengar and Valentino 2000; Petrocik 1996; Simon 2002).

A large literature in political science has argued that American political campaigns can be seen as contests by candidates to highlight certain topics or aspects of issues through the processes of agenda setting, priming, and framing (Budge and Farlie 1983; Druckman 2004; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; Hammond and Humes 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Petrocik 1996; Riker 1983, 1990). At the same time, both political scientists and communication scholars have devoted considerable energy to documenting and explaining the media's agenda-setting power. By calling attention to some issues and according them prominence in print and on the air, the news media subtly shape the public's perceptions about the most important issues facing its country, state, or community (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; McCombs 1993; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Rogers and Dearing 1994; Weaver et al. 1981). This function is particularly evident during campaigns (Ha 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972).

While the twin research tracks have done much to highlight the success of elites in influencing citizens' views of salient political problems, little research has sought to determine how candidate and media agendas interact to shape the public's agenda. In this article, I argue that candidate agendas are more likely to affect voter issue salience when the media also focus on those same issues than when news coverage diverges from candidate issue emphases. To test this argument, I conduct an experiment during the early stages of the 2006 Texas gubernatorial election. I find support for the agenda-convergence hypothesis, with agenda-setting effects about twice as strong when the media reflect the candidates' issue emphases. The results point to the importance in the study of campaigns of accounting for the information flow from both candidates and the media, as well as the value for campaigns of enlisting the media in their effort to disseminate messages to voters.

Agenda Control and the Issue Environment

The struggle for agenda control is central to political campaigns because of the way individuals process information. With relatively well-established views of parties and candidates, people are highly resistant to persuasion, interpreting new information in ways consistent with their beliefs and ignoring messages that contravene what they already believe (see Abelson 1959; Lodge and Hamill 1986; McGuire 1968; Taylor and Crocker 1981; Zaller 1992). Changing minds in such a world is, to say the least, difficult.

Making some considerations more salient than others, however, is an easier task. Because people experience so little of the political world directly, voters' perceptions of the relevance of political problems are highly malleable, subject to the emphases of political elites (e.g., Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972). When people are asked to make a political judgment—such as a vote decision—they search their memories for relevant considerations and base their choice on those considerations (Kelley and Mirer 1974).[1] But because voters have neither the motivation nor the cognitive capacity to take a census of everything they know about a candidate (Simon 1955), the most cognitively accessible information—often, those issues or candidate characteristics that have received attention in a campaign—are more easily retrieved (Zaller and Feldman 1992). Voters then use those considerations, and not others that may have fallen to the bottom of the memory "storage bin," in making a vote choice.

As a result, theories of candidate strategy, including "selective emphasis" (Budge and Farlie 1983), "issue ownership" (Petrocik 1996), the art of heresthetics (Riker 1983, 1990), and others (Hammond and Humes 1993; Simon 2002) stress the importance of calling attention to advantageous issues. By doing so, candidates hope to make their preferred agenda more cognitively accessible to voters and, thus, more likely to serve as the basis of their choice at the polls. As Petrocik (1996, 826) put it, candidates want to make their issues "the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which voters make their choice." The argument for "priming" certain issues and characteristics rests on the same principle (e.g., Druckman 2004; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; though see Lenz [2005] for an alternative explanation of priming effects).

Candidates, though, cannot unilaterally control the issues that are accessible to voters. Their agendas compete with information from other communication channels—voters' family and acquaintances, opposing candidates, and the media, in addition to individuals' personal concerns (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980). Each source can affect the relative accessibility and salience of issues, thus potentially thwarting a candidate's attempts to set the public's agenda.

The media are among the most important parts of this dynamic, and the extent to which news coverage faithfully reflects the issue agendas of candidate has been the source of considerable scholarly scrutiny. While some studies have suggested the media may in some circumstances converge on the same topics that candidates are focused on (Dalton et al. 1998; Just et al. 1996), more frequently scholars argue that candidate-media agenda *divergence* is most likely (Farnsworth and Lichter 2006; Patterson 1994; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003; Semetko et al. 1991; Vavreck 2004). Because the media face a different set of constraints and incentives than candidates (Bennett 1996; Graber 2005; Patterson 1994), news coverage is likely to focus on topics other than the ones candidates are emphasizing.

What is less than clear from the existing literature, however, are the implications of candidate-media agenda convergence and divergence for candidates' attempts to influence voter issue salience. If the media do not always report what candidates want, that may attenuate a campaign's ability to get its messages to the public. But if candidates are equally influential with or without assistance from the media, they might be advised to focus less on "earning" free media coverage and more on transmitting their messages directly to the public. This is in fact a strategy commonly articulated by political practitioners (e.g., Racicot 2004), and one reflected in the growing use of political advertising.[2]

I argue that candidates' success in setting the public's agenda is likely to depend on the media's willingness to pass those messages along. Because citizens experience the vast majority of the political world indirectly (Lippmann 1922), they are inherently uncertain about the most important issues facing the country, their state, or their community. Political elites reduce this uncertainty by focusing on a small handful of problems, attention that aids citizens in deciding which issues are most important.[3] The more concentrated the issue environment—that is, the fewer issues focused on by candidates and the media—the more likely it is the public agenda will reflect the agenda of political elites.

In a situation of candidate-media agenda *convergence*—when the media reflect candidate issue emphases—there are fewer issues for voters to consider outside of the ones that a candidate (or candidates) have emphasized. When both agree on the issue of importance in the campaign, uncertainty about the salience of the issue is reduced for voters. The pictures in their heads of the world around them, to borrow from Lippmann (1922), become more clearly drawn. When news coverage of a campaign focuses on other topics—a situation of agenda *divergence*—this makes another issue or issues accessible to voters, creating a more diffuse issue environment. This may lead to a situation in which more, and different, issues may be cognitively accessible to voters, likely reducing the overall influence of candidate agendas on public opinion.

Consider the following simple example. A candidate focuses his or her campaign on a handful of social welfare issues: education reform, Social Security reform, and the environment. If the media focus largely on these same topics during the course of the campaign, then it is likely that those issues will be rather accessible to voters when they make their vote choice. If, however, the news media devote little attention to the candidate's agenda, and instead focus on national security and immigration, this creates a situation in which a larger set of issues has greater accessibility to voters and is now in direct competition with the candidate's issues. In the aggregate, it is likely that some voters will come to see as salient the issues the media focused on, not necessarily the candidates' social welfare emphases.

The traditional role of the media as a check on government officials also suggests the additional influence of news coverage on the public. To the extent the media are seen as an independent and trustworthy source of information (Miller and Krosnick 2000), the public should be more accepting of their interpretation of the importance of political issues than of the candidates' alone (Aronson and Golden 1962; Hovland and Weiss 1951; Walster and Festinger 1962). Ultimately, then, candidate agenda setting is likely to be more effective if the media reflect their issue priorities.

As a result, *I hypothesize that agenda-setting effects will be stronger when candidate and media agendas converge than when they diverge.* If the hypothesis is confirmed, then it suggests that candidates are well advised to attempt to enlist the media in passing along their messages to voters, as political practitioners often argue (Schwartz 1973). To the extent the hypothesis is not confirmed, then candidates

may be well served by eschewing efforts to garner "free media" and devoting more time and resources to transmitting their messages directly to voters, through campaign literature and television advertising.

Method

Following a tradition of research on media and campaign effects (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Simon 2002), I employ an experimental design. Because they offer complete control over the stimuli of interest, experiments have the benefit of yielding firm causal conclusions, something often elusive in survey research. The benefits of experimentation are myriad (see Kinder and Palfrey 1993), but this is particularly true in studying the flow of campaign information, where survey research cannot accurately identify the content of communications respondents have been exposed to. This too eliminates the need to infer from content analysis and dubious self-reports (e.g., Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Patterson and McClure 1976; see Price and Zaller [1993] and Prior [2005] for more extensive treatments of this issue) what respondents actually read or saw during a campaign.

To be sure, experiments are vulnerable to questions of external validity, but I have attempted to maximize the generalizability of the findings in several ways, similar to the approach taken by Kahn (1996). First, I do not rely on hypothetical or fictional candidates in the study. The experiment draws on actual news coverage and candidate speeches from the 2006 Texas gubernatorial campaign, which was in its early stages when the experiment was conducted. Instead of fabricating entire news reports and candidate speeches, I have relied as much as possible on the real thing. Second, I recruited subjects from Austin and the surrounding area rather than relying on a convenience sample of students, as is common in social science experimentation. The resulting sample is more politically, socially, and demographically heterogeneous than a typical group of students (see supplemental materials available at http://prq.sage pub.com), diversity that is critical in political communication research, since young people tend to be less attentive to public affairs than the general population (Keeter et al. 2002).

Finally, the design itself involved exposing subjects to candidate and media communications twice within the same week, a modified form of the Iyengar and Kinder (1987) "sequential" experiments. While costly and logistically difficult, the multiple

exposure design is important. During a real campaign, citizens confront media coverage and candidate communications over a lengthy time frame. Exposing subjects once to a media or candidate message does not very well mimic a campaign environment, but a multiple exposure design does a better job, though by no means a perfect one, of approximating the information environment of a campaign. Agenda setting occurs because of *repeated* exposure to media or campaign information, so the multiexposure design is critical.

Though the design is an improvement over single-shot studies using fictional candidates, my approach is not without its pitfalls. Primarily, the two-wave panel, occurring over consecutive days, forces me to relinquish some control over the subjects' exposure to information about the gubernatorial campaign. Because panel participation can increase respondents' interest in a political campaign (Bartels 2000)—a specific manifestation of a general "panel effects" problem—this could lead to systematic biases in the subject pool. If that occurs here—if an increase in interest prompts participants to seek out campaign information or news beyond what is provided to them in the laboratory, and this varies across treatment groups—I cannot be sure that my results are the product of the experimental stimuli.

To address this concern, I followed the approach of Iyengar and Kinder (1987; see also Iyenger, Peters, and Kinder 1982, fn. 3), instructing subjects to avoid until their participation was complete reading or watching the news or trying to obtain more information about any of the articles and speeches they encountered in the experiment. There was no formal follow-up to verify that subjects indeed avoided potentially contaminating information, but brief conversations failed to turn up any instances of this.[4]

Still, one could surmise that certain characteristics might make some subjects more likely than others to become so interested by a campaign story or speech that they subsequently sought out more information in the twenty-four hours between the first and second exposure. Among the likely culprits are political interest, political knowledge, and education. Presumably, high levels of any of these could make an individual more likely to seek out information beyond the experimental treatments. Subjects who lack interest, knowledge, or education are unlikely to be motivated to spend time in such an endeavor.

If it is the case that individuals with such characteristics are more susceptible to "contamination

effects," the problem would be acute primarily if their distribution were not random across the treatment groups. For example, if there were an unusual number of "high-interest" individuals in the certain treatment groups—thus a population that might be more disposed to seek out campaign information beyond the experiment—compared to the other treatments, then I would not be able to definitively attribute any differences in agenda-setting susceptibility to the experimental manipulations.

But the data show no such uneven distribution. I conducted an ANOVA analysis with political interest[5] as the dependent variable and the treatment group as the explanatory factor. The results show no differences in the level of political interest across treatment groups ($F = 0.35$, $p = .84$). A series of pairwise difference-of-means tests between each combination of treatment groups also revealed no differences. I also found the same null results for levels of political knowledge[6] ($F = 0.55$, $p = .71$) and education ($F = 0.81$, $p = .53$). There appear to be no differences in the distribution across treatment groups of characteristics that might make subjects likely to seek out campaign information beyond the laboratory.

One final piece of data might also lessen the concern. During the fourteen days the experiments were under way, the local newspaper ran a total of three stories about the gubernatorial campaign, none of which focused on any of the issues addressed in the experiment. Thus, if subjects were inclined to "cheat" by gathering additional information, the paucity of local political coverage would not have made it very easy. To be sure, a truly motivated person could find plenty of information about the campaign on the Internet, but it would not have come about as by-product of the subjects' typical daily routine.

While none of this rules out the possibility of "contamination effects," they appear somewhat unlikely, and methodological choices frequently come down to trade-offs. In this case, the benefits of using the two-wave exposure during an actual campaign to study agenda setting seem to outweigh the costs incurred by the theoretical possibility of information biases. I would agree with Bartels (2000, 19) that in general "the inferential advantages of panel data will easily outweigh the rather modest inferential cost of panel effects."

Design

The study required a design that would allow me to examine individuals' susceptibility to agenda setting

under conditions of candidate-media issue convergence and divergence. To accomplish that, I created an experiment in which subjects read through news articles and candidate speeches from the 2006 Texas gubernatorial campaign without knowing that I was interested in gauging how their perception of issue salience changed between a preexposure and postexposure survey. The recruitment procedures are described in the supplemental materials available at http://prq.sagepub.com.[7]

In an initial phone call during which the subjects were scheduled to take part in the study, each was asked a question constituting a preexposure measure of issue salience. Participants were asked to place a series of political issues "currently facing the state of Texas" on an issue-importance scale, ranging from 0 to 100 (higher scores represented more importance). The eight issues were the environment, the economy, crime, health care, social issues, education, immigration, and taxes.[8] After each issue was read aloud, the subject assigned it a score.[9] The scores served as a measure of preexposure issue salience.

Participants came to a classroom at the University of Texas on two consecutive weeknights. When they arrived, they were told they would be rating the "readability" of different kinds of texts, primarily speeches and news articles. The subjects filled out a questionnaire that included a number of demographic and political items and then were given a packet of materials containing a series of speeches by prominent people and articles labeled as from the *Dallas Morning News*, the state's largest newspaper. When the subjects had read through and rated the readability of each item in the packet, they were dismissed with the promise that they would return the following night.[10]

On the second night, the subjects read through and rated the readability of a second twelve-page packet, again including news articles and speeches. When they were done, they were given a follow-up questionnaire. The postexposure survey included several items asking about the subjects' perceptions of the readability of the texts, as well as the same issue-salience questions they had answered in their initial telephone interview.[11] The changes in the importance subjects ascribe to the issue of taxes constitute the primary focus of this study.

Once they were finished, they were paid for their participation and debriefed about the actual purpose of the study. At that point, 4 of the 157 subjects indicated they suspected the actual purpose of the experiment and were eliminated from the subsequent data analysis.

Experimental Treatments

The experimental manipulation occurred in the content of each packet. I designed four treatments (plus a control) that exposed subjects to information about issues in the gubernatorial campaign, varying the news articles and speeches in the packets. In each treatment, the amount, source, and topic of issue information were varied, which allowed for a comparison of the influence of candidates and the media—and in particular, under conditions of candidate-media convergence and divergence—on people's perceptions of issue importance. The governor's race made for a natural forum, as the campaign between Republican Rick Perry, the incumbent, and his Democratic challenger, former congressman Chris Bell, had just begun. Subjects were likely familiar with the candidates, thus increasing the experiment's external validity, without yet having been inundated with campaign information.[12]

Each packet contained a series of news articles identified as being published in the *Morning News* within the previous two weeks. As described in the supplemental materials, extensive efforts were made to make the articles appear authentic, including the use of actual newspaper copy when possible. Each packet also contained speeches by a number of prominent people. Depending on the treatment group, these were speeches given by, among others, author Toni Morrison, singer Bono, Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates, as well as the candidates, Perry and Bell.[13]

In designing the experiment, I chose to use taxes as the issue that would be central to the treatments for two reasons. First, Perry and Bell, while not centering their campaigns on the issue, had taken positions on taxes, which meant I was able to draw on actual candidate speeches and statements in creating the materials. For other issues, such as the environment or crime, that was not possible. The same was true for news coverage—enough material on taxes existed that would allow me to put together articles as part of the treatments. Second, taxes were not so important in the campaign that the issue was already of paramount concern for voters. Education, for example, has been at the top of Texans' list of state priorities for years and would have proved a poor topic on which to expect a change in salience. The issue of taxes was plausibly important but not so salient that public concern had reached a ceiling. In theory, perceptions of its importance could be moved.

Table 1
Description of Issue Emphasis of Stimulus Items, by Treatment Group

	News Coverage	Perry (R)	Bell (D)
Control	None	None	None
Media	6 taxes articles	None	None
Candidates	None	3 taxes speeches	3 taxes speeches
Convergence	2 taxes articles	2 taxes speeches	2 taxes speeches
Divergence	2 immigration articles	2 taxes speeches	2 health care speeches

Each subject was randomly assigned into one of five treatments that varied in terms of the source of political issue information (news media, candidates, or both) and in the specific issues discussed. Though my primary focus is on the effects of agenda convergence and divergence, additional treatments were necessary to separately gauge the effects of the candidates and the media. Otherwise, I would not have had a baseline to which I could compare the effects of the convergence and divergence treatments.

In all of the treatments, six of the twelve items in the packets were identical—four news articles and two speeches. None of those six items contained political content, as they served to cover the actual purpose of the experiment, which was to investigate the effects of the remaining six items.[14] The six remaining items—referred to here as "stimulus items"—were varied in the treatments. Table 1 displays the basic outlines of each treatment, and the specific topics and examples of the stimulus items are displayed in the supplemental materials.[15]

Control. In the control, the stimulus items were nonpolitical. I used news articles from what might be referred to as the "soft news" sections of the *Dallas Morning News*: a "kids page," a section about pets, the food section, the technology section, and the automotive section. Again, subjects in the control group were not exposed to political information.

Media treatment. This treatment was designed to gauge the influence of news coverage in the absence of candidate communications. Subjects received six news articles about the issue of taxes and the gubernatorial election. No candidate speeches appeared in this treatment.

Candidates treatment. This treatment was designed to gauge the influence of candidate communications in the absence of news coverage. Subjects read six speeches—three each by Perry and Bell—about the issue of taxes. No news articles appeared in this treatment.

Convergence treatment. The treatment was designed to measure the effect when both candidates and the news media converged on the same issue agenda. Subjects read two news stories about taxes, two Perry speeches about taxes, and two Bell speeches about taxes.

Divergence treatment. The treatment was designed to measure the effect when the news media and each candidate focused on different issues. Subjects read two news stories about immigration, two Perry speeches about taxes, and two Bell speeches about health care.

On their return for the second night of the session, subjects were given another packet of twelve pages, very similar to the one they received the night before. Again, six of the items had no overt political content,[16] and the remaining items were varied according to the treatments. Each subject's packet coincided with the treatment into which he or she had been assigned on their first visit. For example, a subject in the *convergence* treatment received, once again, a packet with two news stories, two Perry speeches, and two Bell speeches on the issue of taxes. The stories and speeches were, of course, different in their particulars, but the source and issue topic were the same.

Results

The design allows for a comparison of the effects of candidate-media agenda convergence and divergence on voter issue salience. The *control*, *candidate*s, and *media* treatments serve as a baseline from which to make those comparisons. The primary focus is the difference in the importance subjects ascribed to taxes between the preexposure survey and the postexposure questionnaire. The panel design allows me to focus on change, rather than simply comparing postexposure levels of tax salience across the treatments. I first present the descriptive data before reporting the results from a regression analysis that controls for a number of individual-level factors.

The initial question is simply whether differences exist among the treatments in the change in the subjects' perceived importance of taxes. Recall that

Table 2
Mean Salience of Taxes before and after Exposure, by Treatment Group

	Preexposure	Postexposure	Increase	t	p-Value
Control (n = 30)	69.1 (18.0)	73.3 (24.0)	4.2 (14.9)	1.5	.14
Media (n = 31)	66.9 (23.9)	81.0 (18.9)	14.1* (18.3)	4.3	.00
Candidates (n = 30)	64.6 (25.2)	74.0 (17.0)	9.4 (21.6)	2.4	.02
Convergence (n = 31)	66.4 (17.5)	82.0 (19.0)	15.6* (16.6)	5.2	.00
Divergence (n = 31)	69.9 (17.0)	77.2 (16.5)	7.4 (15.2)	2.7	.01
All subjects (n = 153)	67.4 (20.4)	77.5 (19.3)	10.2 (17.8)	7.1	.00

Note: Scale ranges from 0 to 100. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
*Indicates difference is statistically different from control group difference at $p < .05$.

the participants were asked to place taxes, among other issues, on an issue-importance scale ranging from 0 to 100. If candidates and the media influence public issue salience, then the importance subjects in the treatments ascribed to taxes should have increased as a result of the experimental manipulations. Table 2 displays the mean levels of tax salience in the preexposure and postexposure surveys, the difference between the two, and the *t*-scores and *p*-values for a difference-of-means test.

Despite the small number of subjects in each cell, the perceived importance of taxes increased for each of the four treatment groups: *media*, *candidates*, *convergence*, and *divergence*. The statistically significant changes are expected, given that subjects in each group encountered information about taxes and the gubernatorial campaign. This is the fundamental agenda-setting effect: increased attention to an issue causes an increase in the public's perception of its importance. The increase of 4.2 points in the *control* group is the only change that falls short of statistical significance, as it should; those subjects were not exposed to any information about taxes or other political issues.

The critical comparison is between the *convergence* and *divergence* treatments, where subjects encountered a concentrated and diffuse issue environment, respectively. If my hypothesis is correct—that agenda setting is likely to be more robust when candidates and the media are focused on the same topic—then the effects in the *convergence* treatment should be larger than in the *divergence* treatment.

That is what the data reveal. The increase in the salience of taxes in the *divergence* treatment—where only Perry talked about the issue—was 7.4 points and not statistically different from the *control* group. By contrast, when the candidates and media were focused on taxes, the effect was more than twice the size, with an increase of 15.6 points, statistically larger than the *control* group ($p < .05$). The difference

Table 3
Increase in Issue Salience for Three Issues between Preexposure and Postexposure

	Control	Convergence	Divergence
Taxes	4.2	15.6	7.4*
Health care	5.4	4.1	5.1
Immigration	3.6	6.4	8.1

*Indicates difference between convergence and divergence treatments is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

between the *convergence* and *divergence* effects also is significant ($p < .05$).

The comparison between the *convergence* and *candidates* conditions speaks directly to the role of the media in boosting the ability of candidates to set the public's agenda. When the candidates alone focused on taxes, without the additional repetition of that message by the media, the effect was an increase in tax salience of 9.4 points. In other words, candidates can have an independent influence on what the public views as the critical agenda in a campaign. But the addition of the news coverage of the issue (in the *convergence* treatment) added more than 6 points ($p < .10$) to that effect, a substantial 65 percent increase.[17]

Table 3 presents a comparison of the changes in issue salience for the *control*, *convergence*, and *divergence* groups for each of the three political issues that appeared in the *divergence* treatment. The data reveal that the effects on tax salience are not simply a result of subjects in the *convergence* treatment having more malleable opinions than those in the other groups. In the *divergence* treatment, where Bell focused on health care and the media reported on immigration, the changes in salience for those issues are larger, though not significantly so, than in the *convergence* group, where those topics were not raised. This confirms that the large effects on the salience of taxes were produced by the agreement among the candidates and media about what issue was important—in

other words, that a concentrated issue environment leads to stronger agenda-setting effects.

Individual-Level Regression Analysis

To subject this conclusion to a more rigorous test, I specified a regression model predicting change in a subject's perception of the importance of taxes between the preexposure and postexposure surveys. In other words, the dependent variable is the increase or decrease in the salience of taxes following the experimental treatments.[18]

I include dummy variables for the four experimental conditions, which capture the effects of each treatment while holding constant the individual-level factors. The baseline category, to which the treatment coefficients can be compared, is the *control* group. If the findings from Table 2 are robust, I would expect the effects of the *convergence* treatment to be larger than the *candidates* and *divergence* treatments, even controlling for a host of individual-level factors.

The model includes a number of variables that could affect an individual's susceptibility to agenda setting. A variable for the subject's level of political knowledge—constructed from five factual questions about politics recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996)—accounts for the fact that the more politically aware are less likely to have a "need for orientation" (McCombs and Weaver 1973) and thus less likely to be affected by candidate communications or news content. A second variable indicates whether a subject is a home owner. Much of the tax debate in Texas has to do with property tax rates, a topic raised in several of the news items and speeches. Property taxes, which have a direct effect on home owners, are likely to be more salient for those individuals than for renters. Presumably, home owners will be more susceptible to agenda setting on taxes.

Variables for partisanship control for the possibility of differential effects between partisans and independents, as well as between Republicans and Democrats. Dummies represent self-identified Republicans and Democrats, and the omitted category consists of independents and third-party supporters. I also include a variable for trust in the media[19] to account for the possibility that subjects with higher esteem for the media might be more receptive to their messages (Miller and Krosnick 2000).[20]

The model also contains a variable for the subject's preexposure tax salience. People who gave taxes a high score initially are likely to see smaller increases after exposure than those who saw it as less important. In other words, there is a ceiling effect to

Table 4
Predicting Change in Tax Salience between Preexposure and Postexposure Surveys

Media treatment	7.606* (3.626)
Candidates treatment	2.961 (3.618)
Convergence treatment	10.791* (3.717)
Divergence treatment	3.069 (3.594)
Political knowledge	–3.399* (1.305)
Home owner	5.918* (2.599)
Republican	3.171 (3.601)
Democrat	–7.241* (2.485)
Trust in the media	–0.031 (1.687)
Preexposure tax salience	–0.488* (0.056)
Average change on other issues	0.309* (0.124)
Constant	52.972* (8.246)
Observations	144
Adjusted R^2	.42

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients.
*$p < .05$ (one-tailed tests, except for Republican and Democrat dummies).

contend with. I expect the coefficient for the variable to be negative, indicating that the higher the initial tax score, the smaller any increase is likely to be.

Finally, I add a variable to capture a subject's general propensity to give higher postexposure scores to all issues. The means for five of the seven other issues increased from the presurvey to postsurvey, indicating a tendency for individuals to inflate the salience of many issues after the experiment. The variable represents the average change in the salience measures for the seven other issues.[21] I expect the variable's coefficient to be positive: the more likely a subject is to ascribe greater importance to the other issues after exposure, the more likely her or his tax score is also to increase.[22]

Table 4 presents the results of the ordinary least squares regression. The effects of the treatment variables confirm the comparisons in Table 2. As expected, the change in tax salience was largest in the *convergence* condition (about 10.8 points), one of only two treatment coefficients to achieve statistical significance. Once partisanship, media trust, political knowledge, preexposure tax measures, and the other issue scores were taken into account, candidates had little influence on the subjects' perceptions of the importance of taxes unless the issue was also given attention by the media.[23] In each case, postestimation Wald tests show that the effects of the *convergence* treatment were larger than the *candidates* and *divergence* effects (both $p < .05$).

In sum, the regression analysis supports the story told by the descriptive data. Even controlling for a host of individual-level factors, the strongest agenda-setting

effects occurred when subjects were exposed to a heavy dose of attention to taxes by both the candidates and the media. When the candidates alone focused on the issue, the effects were minimal and almost entirely explained by individual-level differences in the experimental subjects. While the small sample sizes in each treatment urge caution in drawing sweeping conclusions about the precise magnitude of the candidate-media agenda-setting power, the results suggest that candidates are much better off when the media reflect their issue emphases.

Caveats and Conclusions

While valuable, the conclusions in this study, as with much laboratory research, should be taken with a grain of salt. The exposure of the participants to the campaign was reductionist in several ways. First, subjects were presented only with printed materials, in the form of speeches and newspaper articles. Since most voters receive the vast majority of their election information from television—through advertising and news coverage—the stimulus materials did not include the combination of visual, auditory, and sensory cues that pervade the most important forms of contemporary political communication (Graber 2001). It is also possible that the use of candidate speeches may have biased the experiment in favor of media effects. A newspaper article is a common form of news coverage, whereas few people ever read candidate speeches, which may have given the media more credibility than the candidates. Still, a long tradition of research in political science has relied on printed candidate statements as substitutes for firsthand or televised campaign exposure (e.g., Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995), and those studies have found significant effects from similar materials. A replication of this study using electronic media would increase the validity of the findings.

Second, the amount of exposure to the campaign and the combination of candidate-media issue emphases duplicated neither the cacophony of a real election nor the range of possibilities for campaign discourse. While better than the typical experiment, the two-exposure design obviously did not mimic the saturated information environment of a weeks- or months-long campaign. Subjects in the experiment were not presented with more information than they could possibly process, as is the case in many high-profile elections. Nor did it test the effects of the entire range of possible issue-emphasis scenarios that

could emerge in a real campaign. In the *convergence* condition, both candidates were focused on the same topic, which happens sometimes, but not always (Damore 2005; Kaplan, Park, and Ridout 2006; Sides 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002). In the *divergence* condition, media coverage did not favor one candidate's agenda over the other, so the experiment cannot test what happens when the media give attention to one candidate's preferred agenda and ignore the other's.

Moreover, the need for consistency in the volume of information across the treatments created a potentially important difference between the *divergence* treatment and the three other experimental groups. *Divergence* subjects were exposed to just two speeches (in each exposure) about taxes, while subjects in the other three groups saw a heavier volume of taxes-related content. One might posit that the weakness in the *divergence* effects stems not from a more diffuse issue environment—operationalized by including candidate and media communications about health care and immigration—but from the simple fact that less tax-related information was available. If that is the case, then the specific hypothesis about the differential agenda-setting effects under conditions of convergence and divergence remains to be fully tested. Though the data in Table 3 are consistent with the hypothesis that the other issues—immigration and health care—weakened the agenda-setting effects of the tax information, the differences are not statistically significant, and thus not conclusive. Both the "partial convergence" scenario—in which just one candidate's issue agenda is reflected by the media—and specifying a more precise test of the divergence hypothesis are important considerations for future research.

Despite these limitations, the study has merit, having conducted one of the few systematic tests of the interactive effects of candidate and media communications (see Shaw 1999b). The results are not designed to be interpreted as the last word on how candidate and media agendas affect voters but as a demonstration of the possible implications when candidates do, or do not, have success in drawing media attention to their issues. While the conclusions have limited breadth, they may serve as a baseline from which to test the effects in other situations.

The finding is also valuable because it speaks to a real-world phenomenon—varying levels of candidate-media agenda convergence. As has been shown elsewhere (Hayes 2005), the media's willingness to pass along candidates' issue agendas is not constant throughout a political campaign. At some points in

the race, the media may be quite likely to reflect what candidates say on the stump. But at other times, a large gulf may exist between the issues candidates talk about and what the media report. As an example, the news media in the 1996 presidential election were fairly responsive to Bill Clinton's and Bob Dole's issue emphases in the few weeks following Labor Day, giving ink and air time to the candidates' education proposals and tax plans. As the campaign wore on and Election Day neared, however, reporters began to ignore the candidates' stump speeches, preferring to cover the fund-raising scandals and calls for campaign finance reform that began to percolate in early October.

The data presented here suggest that such patterns of candidate-media convergence can have major consequences for the public's view of the importance of political issues and potentially for campaigns' success in influencing the criteria voters use in choosing between candidates. Even in an era of unprecedented direct campaign communication (West 2005), candidates, it seems, have reason to remain concerned about the media's willingness to pass along their messages. When news coverage reflects a campaign's agenda, the influence on the public can be considerable. But agenda-setting effects are relatively weak or nonexistent when voters are exposed to candidate communications alone or when media coverage diverges from candidates' issue priorities. Without the complicity of the media, the impact of candidate strategies such as agenda setting and priming is likely to be attenuated. It is not merely the message that matters, but also the messenger.

Notes

1. This is known as a "memory-based" model of information processing. Other scholars (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995) have argued that an "on-line" model of political judgment is more accurate, whereby individuals encode information as they receive it and later draw on their overall evaluation of a candidate to make a decision, not necessarily the specific bits of information that led to that assessment.

2. In one of the few studies to try to gauge the interactive effect of candidate-media convergence, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) found little advantage for candidates who "ride the wave," running ads on issues that are currently in the news. But that study focuses on the effects on vote choice, not issue salience, which is my concern here. Since issue salience is antecedent to vote choice, it is necessary to first determine whether agenda convergence has any benefit for candidates in shaping public opinion about important problems.

3. Of course, certain issues are of concern to individuals for idiosyncratic reasons, but considerable research has shown that public agendas are not determined independently of communications from elites, especially the news media.

4. Because subjects were told they would be paid only upon successful completion of the study—and signed a form acknowledging this—it is likely that most followed the instructions. They would not have wanted to risk early dismissal.

5. The variable ranges from 0 to 3, with the low score representing *not interested at all* and the high score indicating *extremely interested*.

6. The variable is created from a five-item index tapping respondents' factual knowledge about politics.

7. A series of newspaper and online advertisements for the study generated 215 queries. Over three weeks, 194 participants were scheduled to participate. Of those, 159 showed up at their scheduled first session, for an 81 percent participation rate. Only 2 of the subjects who participated in the first session failed to come back the second night, making for a 99 percent return rate.

8. The wording of the question was as follows: "I'm going to read you a list of issues currently facing the state of Texas. What I'd like you to do is to tell me, on a scale from 0 to 100, how important you think each issue is. A score of 0 would mean you think the issue is not important at all, and a score of 100 means you think issue is of the utmost importance. You are free to give each issue any number in between 0 and 100. Does that make sense?" Once the subjects indicated they understood, they were read the list of issues, one at a time.

9. To eliminate question-ordering effects, the sequence of the issues was randomized for each subject.

10. On average, it took the subjects about twenty-five minutes to read through the items—coincidentally, about the same amount of time as a nightly newscast. The times ranged from fifteen to fifty minutes. Since people read at different speeds, it is not surprising that some subjects finished more quickly than others.

11. Just as in the phone survey, the sequence of the issues in the questionnaire was randomized for each subject.

12. Some background on the election is in order. Perry was nominated virtually without opposition. Bell won the Democratic primary in a landslide, defeating his opponent with 62 percent of the vote. Neither candidate conducted a high-profile primary campaign. Consequently, there was very little media coverage of either candidate. The election news that was published tended to focus on the possibility of independent gubernatorial bids by the Republican comptroller, Carole Keeton Strayhorn, and author and self-described Jewish cowboy Kinky Friedman. To the extent that issues were raised, the state's system of financing public school education drew the most attention. At the time, Texas was under a court order to revise what the state Supreme Court has ruled an unconstitutional funding scheme, and the matter has been at the center of state politics for years.

13. Each page containing a speech began with an identification of the speaker, a brief description of the source of the speech, and a small "head shot" of the speaker. The candidate speeches were identified as coming from their Web sites and also included a small photograph of the candidate. The candidate speeches came from three sources. Most of the speeches did in fact come from documents on the candidates' Web sites, as did the candidate photos. But I also took two Perry speeches from his gubernatorial Web site and created two of the Bell speeches from statements he had made in published interviews. In all cases, the materials subjects were presented with were actual campaign statements, though they had been edited for space, continuity, and issue focus.

14. The nonpolitical news articles in the packet for the first exposure were about (1) a nonprofit that trains guide dogs, (2) the

most recent definition of "whole grain" foods, (3) the development of high-definition radio, and (4) a Texas woman's recent trip to Egypt with her son. The two nonpolitical speeches were excerpted from author Toni Morrison's commencement address at Wellesley College and Microsoft founder Bill Gates's speech to a recent technology conference. Each item was chosen because it lacked political content.

15. The order of the materials in every packet was randomized with a random number generator to ensure that any effects could not be attributed to the order of the articles and speeches.

16. The four nonpolitical news items in the second exposure were about (1) the death of Dana Reeve, widow of actor Christopher Reeve; (2) wildflowers in Texas; (3) candy makers' attempts to cater to the health conscious; and (4) the use of GPS technology to create the activity "geocaching." The speeches were by rock singer Bono at the University of Pennsylvania commencement (which was edited to eliminate political material about worldwide poverty and AIDS) and by author David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College's commencement.

17. The large effect in the *media* treatment—14.1 points—underscores the credibility the media may carry as independent purveyors of political information and confirms the conventional agenda-setting effect of the news media. When subjects were faced with a large amount of news coverage—six articles—about one topic, their perception of the salience of that issue is almost bound to go up.

18. Summary statistics for all variables in the model are available from the author upon request.

19. The media trust measure was, "How much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly?" The options were *almost never*, *only some of the time*, *most of the time*, and *just about always*. Because only three subjects chose *just about always*, the two most favorable options were collapsed to create a variable ranging from 0 to 2.

20. In a series of other analyses, I have specified models that included interaction terms between partisanship and the experimental treatments, as well as between media trust and the treatments. The results of those models are difficult to interpret because of high levels of collinearity, in part a product of the small number of observations. But in broad strokes, the results do nothing to contradict the findings presented here: agenda-setting effects are strongest under conditions of candidate-media convergence, weakest under conditions of divergence, and the media are more influential than candidates alone.

21. In other words, I added together the increases in salience for the environment, the economy, crime, health care, education, social issues, and immigration. I then divided the sum by seven.

22. This represents only a fraction of the individual-level data collected in the preexposure questionnaire. I also specified a number of alternative models predicting changes in tax salience, using as independent variables age, education, income, race, marital status, number of children in the household, ideology, self-reported media exposure, and interest in politics. For the most part, these variables did little to improve the fit of the model, and none are theoretically justified to include in the final model in Table 4.

23. Most of the control variables behave as expected. The preexposure tax salience measure and the subject's tendency to inflate their issue importance scores in the postexposure survey are significant and in the expected direction. People with lower initial tax salience and people who gave higher postexposure scores to the other seven issues saw larger increases in tax

salience. Individuals with higher levels of political knowledge saw smaller increases in tax salience, and Democratic identifiers were less likely to move than independents. There was no significant difference between Republicans and independents. Home owners, as predicted, were more susceptible to agenda setting.

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